

Local News
The Seattle Times

UW researchers say AI is coming for kids books, but it's biased

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Melanie Walsh, assistant professor of informatics and member of the research team that conducted a study on gender representation in AI-generated animal stories, holds a book among the shelves of the University of Washington's... (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times) **More** ▼

By **Ann Duan**

Seattle Times staff reporter

Russell Samora, 38, of western Massachusetts was reading a children's book with his daughter when the thought crossed his mind: Why are the bears always boys?

He remembered thinking, "Wait a minute, there's a bear and a rabbit in the story, but there's absolutely no reason for the bear to be referred to as a boy."

That's when Samora started noticing a trend. Most of the animals in the books he read to his daughter were male.

"It was something I couldn't unsee," he said.

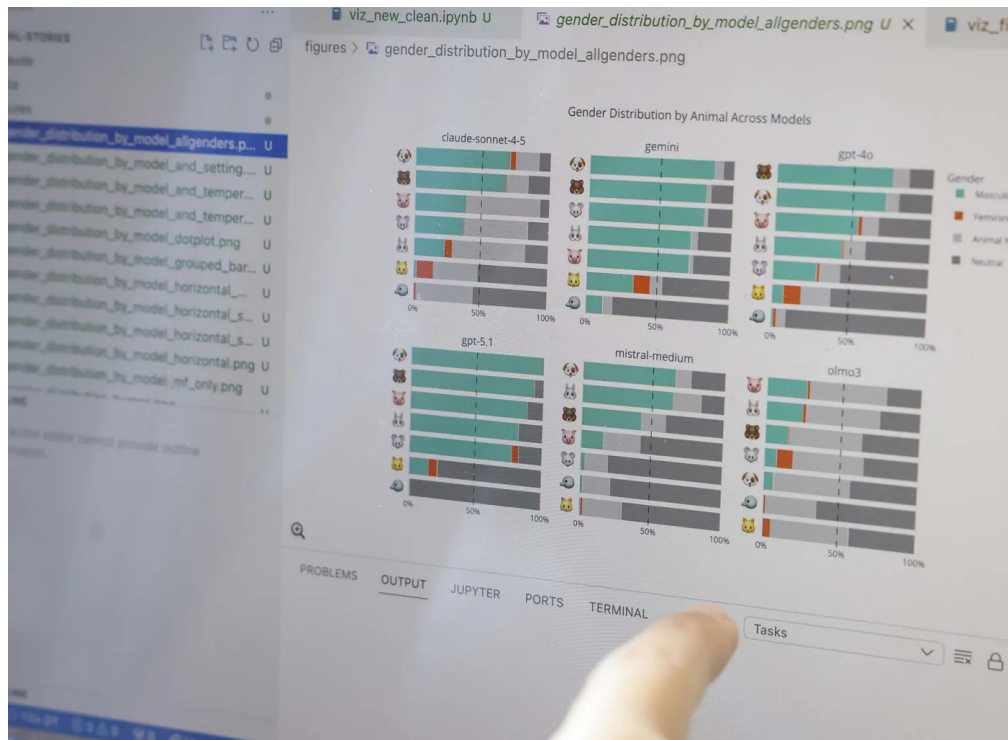
He became curious why animal characters are usually boys. A data journalist himself, Samora teamed up with experts, including Melanie Walsh, an assistant professor of informatics at the University of Washington, to determine which genders were assigned most often to animal characters in children's books.

Now, Walsh and doctoral students Imani Finkley and Yuanxi Li have taken those questions one

step further by exploring what happens when artificial intelligence gets involved.

Out of the 300 books Samora and his colleagues looked at in their original study published last year, researchers found he/him pronouns were used twice as often as she/her pronouns. Their research included 30 popular books from each decade since the 1950s, plus one category for books released before then.

They found certain animals were more likely to be described as male or female. While bears were mostly male, cats, on the other hand, were more likely to be female.



Melanie Walsh, assistant professor of informatics and member of the research team that conducted a study on gender representation in AI-generated animal stories, shows a visual of findings at the University... (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times) [More](#) ▾

Researchers also surveyed 1,300 people to see how their biases would stack up against the books. They asked respondents to finish this sentence: “And then the bear said, ‘I must go to the river.’ Upon arriving....”

While the bear was randomly swapped for bird, cat, pig, duck, mouse or dog, the survey results revealed distinct gender biases. Respondents favored male pronouns for all six animals.

These results were published in [The Pudding](#) last year.

As AI-generated children’s books hit the market, Walsh said her team’s study, which builds upon earlier findings, can guide future research on AI and gender bias.

“Undeniably, AI is already being used in children’s storytelling,” she said.

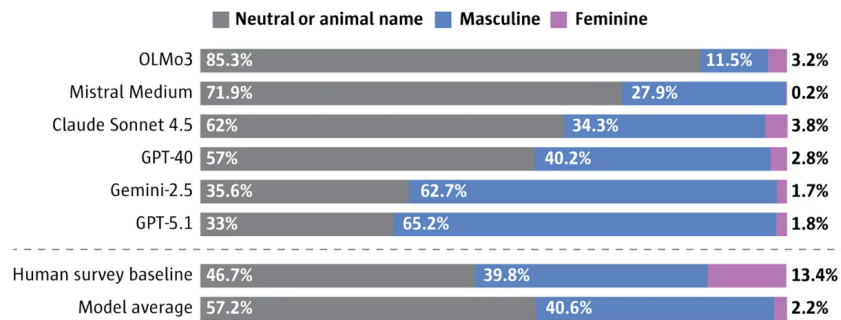
Books with AI-generated content have flooded the self-publishing market on platforms like Amazon. Features like Gemini’s Storybook also allow users to generate children’s stories for AI to read aloud.

The team prompted six different AI models, including Claude, Gemini and ChatGPT, to finish a sentence, similar to the test run for the research published in The Pudding. For this test, one of seven animals — a bear, bird, cat, dog, mouse, pig or rabbit — was completing a task.

Gendered pronouns and names in AI-generated children’s stories

UW researchers analyzed how six large language models applied genders to seven anthropomorphic animals in over 23,000 cases when prompted to finish a story

where the animal's gender was not specified.



Sources: Melanie Walsh, Imani Finkley, Yuanxi Li (Graphic by Shaun Martin / The Seattle Times)

Combining data from all six AI models, researchers found AI preferred to write around pronouns and gendered names, using gender neutral language like “it” or “the bird” to describe the animal.

In cases where large language models did give animals a gender, they were predominantly male. Researchers asked the same question to different AI models 24,000 times. Gender-neutral language or the animal’s name were used 57% of the time. 41% of animals were male, and just 2% were female. They/them pronouns were used in two instances to describe an animal character.

“They’ve basically erased female animal characters,” Walsh said in an Aug. 6 release from UW. “So they’re not only amplifying our human biases, but they’re twisting them in strange, unexpected ways.”

For corporate models like OpenAI’s ChatGPT, Walsh said it’s hard to be sure why some preferred gender-neutral language.

“It’s not possible to investigate them or scrutinize them in the same way as an open model,” she said.

One explanation might be that platforms were trying to avoid gender biases by avoiding gender entirely, Walsh said, but “they’re messing up.”

Walsh and other experts are concerned about how AI is squashing gender diversity.

“Yeah, we can use this model to generate a story about a talking bear for my child, but how is this bear being represented?” said Finkley, one of the doctoral students who worked on the study.

Michelle Martin, the Beverly Cleary professor for children and youth services at the UW Information School, said she’s not surprised by the study’s findings, since AI algorithms learn from existing content that reflects human bias.

But she also said representation is especially important in books designed for kids.

“It’s important for children to see representation of their experiences,” she said. “If you don’t see it in what you read, you get the idea that you don’t count.”

Libraries have also jumped in on the AI conversation. The Seattle Public Library has committed to not purchasing materials that include AI-generated content, said Kate Sellers, managing librarian for technical and collection services, in a statement.

However, she also said it can be difficult to tell when AI has been used.

“These materials in digital format are not always properly labeled or identified by OverDrive, our main e-book and e-audiobook vendor, so it is possible some will appear in the collection in the Libby app, but we do our best to monitor the situation and avoid AI-generated materials when selecting new materials for the Library’s collection,” she said.

Ann Duan: aduan@seattletimes.com. Ann Duan is a metro intern at The Seattle Times, covering a range of local news. She previously interned at The Daily Herald in Everett, The Olympian and U.S. News & World Report. She has also written for Street Sense Media and for The GW Hatchet while studying journalism at George Washington University. Duan grew up in Washington, between Renton, Mukilteo, Mill Creek and Shoreline.